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## **The Alcohol Knowledge and Drinking Myths of a National Sample of University Students**

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Over the past 10 years there has been increased alcohol education programming on the college campus. Since 1980, most college campuses have developed various prevention programs and policies concerning drinking (Gadaleta & Anderson, 1986; Gonzalez & Broughton, 1986). During this time period, the mass media have also made efforts in the area of alcoholism and drinking and driving. It is hypothesized that a concurrent increase in alcohol knowledge along with a decrease in drinking myths among students may have occurred because of both university and mass media efforts.

Many reports have indicated that various demographic factors such as sex, race, religion, and bonding to institutions are related to drinking patterns (Engs & Hanson, 1985; Hanson & Engs, 1986; Cherry, 1987). Only a few studies have investigated these demographic variables in relationship to knowledge of alcohol and myths concerning drinking (Engs, 1979; Jolly & Oxford, 1983). Some studies have investigated change-of-knowledge scores after educational programs (Engs, 1977; Goodstadt & Caleekal, 1984). Only one report has been found to examine change-of-knowledge scores over time (Gonzalez, 1986) and none within various demographic groups were found. This type of information would be useful for college student personnel to help ascertain which student groups might need extra educational targeting, which myths might need additional educational focus, and the effect of policies and programs in dispelling inaccurate alcohol information. Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine the drinking myths and knowledge of alcohol among a national sample of university students from the same universities at two different time periods.

## METHODS

An anonymous precoded instrument, The Student Alcohol Questionnaire, which has been used in numerous studies concerning college student drinking patterns and knowledge about alcohol, was used. The instrument includes demographic items and 36 alcohol knowledge questions. The questionnaire was administered in class to students in survey-type sociology and health classes from the same 72 universities in 1982-83 (N=4,877) and 1984-85 (N=4,176). Universities from all 50 states were represented in this sample. The statistical procedures of t-test and Chi square analysis were accomplished using the SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences).

## RESULTS

Of 36 possible correct answers regarding alcohol knowledge, the earlier sample exhibited a mean of 20.9 while the latter group received a significantly higher ( $p < .05$ ) mean score of  $\sim 1.3$ . Within the various demographic groups, there was a significant increase ( $p < .05$ ) in the mean knowledge score of men (21.6 and 22.1), Whites (21.4 and 21.7), and Roman Catholics (21.4 and 21.8) respectively between the two time periods. There was no change for women, Blacks, and other religious groups.

For eight (22%) of the 36 items, there were significant ( $p < .05$ ) increases in the percentage of correct answers during the second time period. The percent of individuals who agreed with the statement over the two time periods are as follows: "Alcohol is classified as a stimulant (29.5 versus 26.6%); "A blood alcohol concentration of 0.1 % is the legal definition of alcohol intoxication in most states in regard to driving" (75.8% versus 81.0%); Drinking coffee or taking a cold shower can be an effective way of sobering up" (30.9% versus 22.1%); "Drinking milk slows absorption of alcohol through the stomach" (45.0% versus 54.0%); "The most commonly drunk alcoholic beverages in the U.S. are distilled liquors" (36.2% versus 31.7%); "To prevent getting a hangover [you] should sip [your] drink slowly, drink and eat at the same time. space drinks over a period of time, and [not] overdrink for your limit" (88.5% versus 90.3%); "Alcohol is not a drug" (7.1% versus 5.1%); and Distilled liquors usually contain about 15% to 20% alcohol by volume" (72.4% versus 65.9%). There was however, a significant decrease in correct answers regarding two items: "Table wines contain from 2-12% alcohol by volume" and "There is usually more alcoholism in a society which accepts drunken behavior than in a society which frowns on drunkenness."

Within the various demographic groups, there were significant differences ( $p < .05$ ) in mean alcohol knowledge scores. Men had a higher mean score (22.0) compared to women (20.8). Whites scored higher (21.7) than Blacks (17.1). Students for whom religion was not important scored higher (21.5) compared with students for whom religion was important (20.1). Roman Catholics and Protestants, for whom drinking is sanctioned, scored higher (21.1) compared to Protestants (19.3). who belonged to groups in which drinking is not allowed.

## DISCUSSION

The results of this national survey of students from the same universities at two different time periods indicated a slight increase in total knowledge scores. Results also showed an increase in the percentage of students who correctly answered 20% of the 36 questions. For example, fewer students believed in the myth that black coffee and cold showers would sober a person up and that alcohol was a stimulant. The apparent increase in knowledge and decrease in some drinking myths may be the result of mass media and campus alcohol education efforts.

There was a decrease in the percentage of students who correctly knew the answers to two items. Fewer students knew the percentage of alcohol in wine, which might be explained by the fact that there are now a variety of “wine coolers” and other wine drinks containing a wide range of alcohol leading to confusion on how to answer this item. There was a decrease in the percentage of students who correctly knew the relationship to a society's response to drunkenness and problem drinking. This might be a result of the fact that this information has been ignored in the current focus of drunk driving and alcoholism without regard to cultural attitudes.

It is interesting to note that men, Whites, Roman Catholics, and nonreligious students who traditionally consume more alcohol and have more alcohol related problems, had an increase in knowledge between the two time periods while the low-consuming groups had no change. These higher consumption groups also had a greater knowledge of alcohol compared to the lower consumption groups. Perhaps the traditional higher consuming students were more interested in alcohol and drinking topics. This may have stimulated them to be more interested in learning: about alcohol-related information from the mass media and educational programs compared with the students who were less likely to drink. They may have also had a higher knowledge of alcohol and drinking compared to the low consumption groups because of experience or because it was a subject of interest to them.

This study has shown an increase in knowledge and decrease in drinking myths over time and a difference in knowledge among different demographic groups. Thus, it is recommended that a knowledge portion be included in the evaluation of college alcohol education programs to determine the effects of programming, to dispel inaccurate information, to determine what myths need additional focus, and to determine what population groups might need extra educational targeting.

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